United Nations A/HRC/28/NGO/129

General Assembly

Distr.: General
25 February 2015

English only

Human Rights Council
Twenty-eighth session
Agenda item 3
Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Written statement* submitted by the AUA Americas Chapter Inc., a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[15 February 2015]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

GE.15-03543 (E)
1503543

Please recycle

Religious violence against the indigenous Assyrians of Iraq

I. Introduction

1. This brief written statement is submitted on behalf of the indigenous Assyrians of Iraq, and to give a voice to the voiceless.

2. Section II summarizes the identity of the indigenous Assyrians of Iraq, and thereafter analyzes and contextualizes the currently ongoing and historical acts of religious violence, then rejects the dissociations of religion from religious violence, and lastly differentiates between catalysts and causes of religious violence. Section III offers final conclusions and recommendations to be implemented by the HRC and appropriate UN mechanisms.

II. Religious violence against the indigenous Assyrians of Iraq

A. Linking the historical and contemporary factors of religious violence

3. Due to the length constraints of this report, only one significant example linking the historical and contemporary factors of religious violence against the indigenous Assyrians of Iraq is discussed below.

4. Assyrians, also referred to as Chaldeans and Syriacs, represent a distinct, ethno-religious and linguistic community in the Middle East with a heritage linked to the pre-Islamic and pre-Arab civilizations of Mesopotamia. They are politically non-dominant, profess to various ancient traditions of Christianity, and were historically the first to settle in many of the territories of Northern Iraq, Northeastern Syria, Southeastern Turkey and Northwestern Iran. Their language, a dialect of Aramaic known commonly as "Sureth," once a lingua franca of Western Asia, has been designated as "definitely endangered" by UNESCO and faces the threat of extinction in the lands where it originated. [1]

5. *Jizya*, an Islamic tax levied against *kuffar* (infidels) within the *dar al Islam* (abode or house of Islam) was first implemented in the 7th century Islamic Caliphate. The *dhimmi* (non-Muslim citizens of the Caliphate), specifically the *ahl al kitaab* (people of the book), identified as Jews and Christians, are reserved a special status within the Islamic Caliphate wherein they face an ultimatum consisting of three choices: 1) pay the *jizya* and submit oneself to a subjugated position in society thereby recognizing the dominance of Islam and authority of the Caliphate, 2) convert to Islam, or 3) death. Soon after the capture of the city of Mosul in June of 2014, the terrorist group known as the Islamic State issued a formal decree instituting the aforementioned ultimatum to the Christians of the Nineveh Plains, which explicitly stated that the Christian residents must pay the *jizya* tax, convert to Islam,

[1] Matthew Thomas, Agenda Item: Roundtable 1 – UN System Action for the Implementation of Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Oral Intervention at the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples, Assyrian Universal Alliance – Americas Chapter, September 22, 2014.

or die.[2] A similar decree had been previously issued by the Islamic State to the Christians residing in Syria.[3]

6. This act of religious violence has profound historical and religious significance within the religion of Islam and particularly with respect to the indigenous Assyrians of Iraq. Clearly, there is a link between this seemingly archaic form of religious violence carried out centuries ago against the indigenous Assyrians of Iraq and the current acts being perpetrated against them today by such terrorist groups as the so-called Islamic State (aka, ISIS or ISIL).

7. As a result, historical, and often generational, acts of religious violence carried out against a particular group such as the indigenous Assyrians of Iraq, may be directly linked to contemporary acts of religious violence, as is the case of *jizya*. This linkage offers perspective in understanding the collective memory of oppression and contextualizes the current acts of religious violence.

B. Religion as a primary root cause of religious violence

8. Religion is the primary root cause of *religious* violence. A distinction must be made here between religion, the system of faith, ideas, and/or beliefs, and religious violence, the act(s) committed in the name of religion. Typically religion itself is not inherently violent.

9. While several competing independent and interdependent factors, domestic and external as well as contemporary and historical, may be attributed as root causes of religious violence, it is a fallacy to completely dissociate the historical context of the religion from the primary cause.

10. Contrary to SP Heiner Bielefeldt's report, religious violence cannot be qualified as such without religion existing as a primary factor, cause, and/or justification for said act(s) of violence.[4]

11. For example, it is as equally illogical and misleading to completely dissociate the religion of Islam from acts of violence carried out in the name of Islam, as it would be to completely dissociate the religion of Christianity from acts of violence carried out in the name of Christianity.

---

[2] "Convert, Pay Tax, or Die, Islamic State Warns Christians in Iraq," *Newsweek*, July 18, 2014. Available online at: http://www.newsweek.com/convert-pay-tax-or-die-islamic-state-warns-christians-iraq-259888. For the original Arabic language document and English translation, see Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Specimen S: Ultimatum for the Christians of Mosul" in Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents, *Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi's Blog*, January 27, 2015. Available online at: http://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/01/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents

[3] Richard Spencer, "Militant Islamist group in Syria orders Christians to pay the tax for their protection," *Daily Telegraph*, February 27, 2014. Available online at: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/10666204/Militant-Islamist-group-in-Syria-orders-Christians-to-pay-tax-for-their-protection.html

[4] See Section II, Part B, paras. 15 & 18, and Part C, para. 25 in "Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt," 29 December 2014, A/HRC/28/66.

12. Contemporary, and historical, acts of religious violence, such as *jizya*, carried out against the indigenous Assyrians of Iraq, must include the religion itself including the historical context as a primary, although not necessarily the only, root cause, factor, or justification.

C. Catalysts of religious violence and recent political developments

13. Institutional policies and domestic instability are *catalysts* of religious violence.

14. In the context of religious violence, certain socio-economic and political conditions represent correlational factors and catalysts that often amplify, positively or negatively, the level of religious violence.

15. Contrary to the SP Heiner Bielefeldt's report, loss of trust in public institutions and policies of exclusion are *not* root causes of religious violence rather correlational factors and catalysts.[5]

16. The Nineveh Plains, home to the indigenous Assyrians of Iraq, fell to the terrorist group the Islamic State in June of 2014. While Kurdish forces have provided limited support for the indigenous Assyrians, more international support is required to help the Assyrians reclaim their indigenous territories, lands, and resources.

17. When the state, in this case the Government of Iraq is unable to prevent and counter acts of religious violence committed against the indigenous Assyrians, then the responsibility for an intervention falls on the international stakeholders such as the United Nations.

18. However, while the UN's words and decrees are morally upright and meaningful, they do little to physically protect the indigenous Assyrians and reinforce the need for states to protect its citizens.

19. Caught between the UN's verbal condemnations of religious violence against the indigenous Assyrians of Iraq, and the inability and unwillingness by the Government of Iraq and Kurdistan Regional Government to effectively counter and protect the indigenous Assyrians, what chance do the indigenous Assyrians have to survive in their ancestral homeland?

20. As a result of this harsh dilemma, the indigenous Assyrians have taken to arming themselves into haphazardly and loosely organized militias to counter threats or real acts of religious violence carried out by state or non-state actors. Furthermore, reclaiming any indigenous territory within the Nineveh Plains becomes another overwhelming obstacle.

III. Conclusions and recommendations

[5] See Section II, Part C, paras. 26-35 in Ibid.

21. Pursuant to the Early Warning Decision on Iraq that was reached in August 2014 during the Eighty-fifth (85th) session of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination that "Urges the Secretary-General of the United Nations to submit to the Security Council the suggestion to set up a UN peace force as a temporary emergency measure, in order to create a safe zone in the plain of Niniveh, enabling the free return of the displaced persons and the protection of the communities traditionally living in the area."[6]

22. Given the inability of the Government of Iraq to protect, counter, and prevent threats and acts of religious violence against the indigenous Assyrians of Iraq, the United Nations must immediately deploy a substantial peace keeping force into the Nineveh Plains in order to protect the indigenous Assyrians suffering atrocities committed by the so-called Islamic State as well as those who have been forcibly displaced.

23. In addition, said UN peacekeeping force must act swiftly to facilitate local efforts to reclaim the lost territories and ancestral homeland of the indigenous Assyrians in the Nineveh Plains as well as mediate any officially sanctioned restitution as a result of negligence, civil, and criminal violations on behalf of state and non-state actors like the so-called Islamic State.

24. Lastly, said UN peacekeeping force must assist in the immediate protection and return of the culturally significant and ancient artifacts connecting the indigenous Assyrians to their homeland in the Nineveh Plains that have since been looted, stolen, and sold on the black market.

---

[6] "Prevention of Racial Discrimination, Including Early Warning and Urgent Action Procedures, Decision 1 (85), Iraq, 2313th meeting, August 22, 2014. Available online at: http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CERD/EarlyWarning/early-warningDecisionIraq.pdf